

MA THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

Public Information Department, 11150 East Blvd., Cleveland, Ohio 44106; 216/421-7340

PRESS RELEASE

October 24, 1984

Transformations in Japanese Printmaking, an exhibition on view at The Cleveland Museum of Art through December 16, 1984, traces the evolution of the Japanese print from the woodblock prints of the mid-18th century to the innovative works of the last decade. The exhibition includes 98 single prints and 13 books of prints from the collections of The Cleveland Museum of Art with several works lent by private collectors. Hilliard Goldfarb, assistant curator of prints and drawings at the Cleveland Museum, who organized the exhibition, has grouped the prints in categories representing the principal themes in Japanese printmaking: beautiful women, deities, warriors and heroes, landscape, scenes of everyday life, and nature studies. By juxtaposing early and modern prints within each section, Dr. Goldfarb shows how traditional themes and techniques have continued to interest and influence the work of modern printmakers. The exhibition concludes with a selection of contemporary abstract prints--lithographs, silkscreens, and woodcuts--which derive much of their inspiration from Japanese calligraphy.

The Japanese woodblock prints known as ukiyo-e or "pictures of the floating world"--because they recorded the fleeting pleasures of the world of courtesans and Kabuki actors in the entertainment district of Edo (old Tokyo)--were first produced in the mid-17th century. The first prints were in black and white, sometimes hand colored; but during the mid-18th century a method of color printing by means of separate ink blocks was perfected. Beautiful, elegantly dressed women and their activities were the favorite subjects of 18th-century ukiyo-e printmakers, notably Utamaro, Eishi, and Kiyonaga. Portraits of famous actors dramatically

(more)

2-transformations in japanese printmaking

posed in roles from popular plays were also widely produced; the finest actor prints were made by Sharaku and Toyokuni at the end of the 18th century.

The Western technique of perspective, which Japanese printmakers saw in the Dutch engravings introduced to Japan in the 16th century, was employed in landscapes and views of scenic attractions which became popular in the 19th century. One of the two great masters of the landscape print, Hokusai (1760-1849), was a prolific and versatile artist whose work is represented in this exhibition by a number of prints, including two from his famous series, 36 Views of Mt. Fuji, and seven sketchbooks reproducing his realistic and spirited drawings of people, animals, and various aspects of Japanese life. The other great landscape artist, Hiroshige, (1797-1858), noted for his sensitive depictions of landscape at different seasons, is represented by prints from his two best known series, the 53 Stations of the Tokaido (views along the route between Edo and Kyoto) and 100 Views of Famous Places in Edo, as well as an impressive panoramic landscape triptych. Also in demand in the 19th century were scenes of everyday life, the deities and demons of religion and literature, and prints of flowers and birds. A contemporary of Hiroshige, Kuniyoshi (1798-1861), is celebrated for his prints of warriors, battle scenes, and dramatic episodes from Japanese history and legend.

After Japan opened its doors to the West in the 1850s and its artists became interested in Western ideas and art, ukiyo-e went into decline. The last creative ukiyo-e artist, Yoshitoshi (1839-1892) borrowed Western stylistic devices, such as foreshortening and shading, to produce dramatic, emotionally-charged works based on traditional Japanese subject matter, such as the two prints in this show from his series 100 Aspects of the Moon.

In the early 20th century, woodblock printing was revitalized by artists who had studied Western painting and printing methods and were creating their

(more)

3-transformations in japanese printmaking

own original styles. The landscape artists Hiroshi Yoshida (1876-1950) and Kawase Hasui (1885-1957) are closest to the ukiyo-e tradition, but their Japanese scenes are largely Western in style. The bold, expressive black and white designs of Unichi Hiratsuka (b. 1895) and Shiko Munakata (1903-1975) are modern in form but traditional in subject matter and sensibility; both artists were inspired by Buddhist prints of Japan's medieval period.

Many other printmakers, such as Kiyoshi Saito (b. 1907) and Koshiro Onchi (1891-1955), have been inspired by the work of European printmakers. Onchi, one of the most original and influential of the early modern printmakers, introduced abstract art to Japan. In recent decades Japanese artists have experimented with such Western printmaking techniques as engraving, lithography, and silkscreen. Yozo Hamaguchi (b. 1909) revived the mezzotint (popular in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries) and developed techniques for producing mezzotints in color. Ryohei Tanaka (b. 1933) is known for detailed, realistic etchings of the rural life of contemporary Japan. As the most recent prints in the exhibition demonstrate, contemporary Japanese printmakers, while responding to a Japanese mode of vision, are much in tune with artistic movements worldwide.

#

For additional information and photographs, please contact the Public Information Office, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 11150 East Boulevard, Cleveland, Ohio 44106; 216/421-7340.